



LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

No. 36 – December 2022

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The Pegasus Ethos

A Path to High Performance

by Capt. Rosie Wild (RHA)

The term 'high performance' is subjective. It manifests itself in different ways to every single person and can adapt and transform in line with the values and progress of the individual. My definition of high performance is personal and idiosyncratic, and – in all honesty – it is fickle. It is continually changing. Nonetheless, there is one constant and that is what 'high performance' does not mean, and that is 'high success'. You can be high performing and never win anything. You can be high performing and have no certificates, diplomas, or grades to your name. The way I see it, if you are adopting the processes and analysis of performing to the absolute best of your abilities, engaging, and challenging your mind and body to find and push your limits, then you are high performing.

Your 'performance' in life is not measured in quantifiable outputs. The value of how you performed, how you progressed, or what you achieved, is not the sum of your trophies, medals or wins. Success can only be measured *against* the size of the challenge that you set yourself, the level of commitment you offered, and the passion you gave. According to Brené Brown, 'vulnerability is our most accurate way to measure courage'. What she means by this is that the only way you can be brave is to do something that makes you afraid, and that shows how courageous you are. In the same vein, I believe that challenge is our most accurate way to measure high performance. The only way you can be high performing is to do something that challenges you physically, mentally, or conceptually.

I want to discuss how I apply my understanding of high performance into our profession – namely soldiers and officers of the British Army, bound by the Values and Standards, bred on the Army Leadership Code and nurtured by the numerous leadership courses and training we undertake as we progress through our careers, all developed and executed in practice on training exercises and

ultimately operations. More specifically, I will relate this to my current field, the Army's Rapid Reaction Force: 16 Air Assault Brigade Combat Team.

As a junior Captain in 7th Parachute Regiment Royal Horse Artillery, I am the Commander of a small Fire Support Team, which belongs to a Tactical Group within a sub-unit, which in turn is part of a unit (a Regiment), which is part of a brigade. This Insight will try and explain how the ethos of a brigade has a significant impact at every level, from unit to sub-unit, to team and to individual. It will do so by focusing on three different elements: why we are; how we are; who we are. This is not based on official doctrine or SOIs, this is my own interpretation of the ethos and character of the Brigade.

Why we are: The Pegasus Ethos.

As British Airborne soldiers we place the mission, and our comrades, before ourselves. Our bravery is founded upon determination, endurance and selflessness. We are supremely disciplined, and that discipline is primarily self-imposed. We take pride in being part of an elite, and we understand our responsibility to strive for the highest standards of achievement, turnout and attitude. We wear Pegasus with humility, recognising our obligation never to demean or diminish the value of others. We are a compassionate friend, but a ferocious enemy. In battle, in barracks, and at home, we always do the right thing.

This is our ethos. It is clear, it is confident, it is important. I have underlined the adjectives in there that describe an Airborne soldier, the valued expectations that we all hold ourselves up against, the qualities of character we are taught to strive for and embody. What I want to draw attention to, however, are the two smallest, but mightiest, words in the Pegasus Ethos, 'we' and 'our'. These words are indicative of an organisation whose collective goal it is to be a high performing team, the Very High Readiness Brigade. It is the tip of the spear of the Army, ready to deploy around the world, at short notice, by whatever means necessary, to serve the interests of our Nation.

Our team are the custodians of the maroon beret, with a Pegasus on our left arm and wings on our right. Wearing the same uniform worn by airborne soldiers passed, and the same that will be worn by those to come. A legacy. As the Airborne motto states *ad unum omnes*, all together as one. Having an ethos instils in us a passion that what we deliver as an output is as conceptual and moral as it is physical. Having self-imposed discipline and responsibility in our output is our commitment. And doing it all with humility and self-sacrifice whilst valuing all those around us is the challenge.

How We Are

How we are high performing in the Brigade is more quantifiable. It is about the training and the leadership at the tactical level. Every soldier and officer who serves in the Brigade has chosen to be here. They have accepted the challenge of the pre-parachute selection course, and in doing so have shown their commitment and passion to a collective cause. However, passing the course is only the start of the journey, and these same soldiers relentlessly train and exercise themselves physically and mentally to maintain the highest standard in all things. We train to fight, but that does not just mean fixing bayonets or calling in offensive fires, it means training to be ready for *anything, anytime, anywhere* (think *omnia, ubique, utrinque paratus*).

In August 2021, the final collapse of the two-decade mission in Afghanistan took just a single day, as Taliban entered the capital, the President fled the country, all Western embassies abandoned their posts, and this triggered a mass evacuation of tens of thousands of men, women, and children from the country. It was here, in an inconspicuous hotel just outside Hamid Karsal International Airport (HKIA) that the 2nd Parachute Regiment (2 PARA) Battlegroup established and executed one of the largest Non-Combatant Evacuation Operations (NEO) in history. It was here that soldiers and

officers from 16 Air Assault Brigade deployed with one collective goal: to evacuate all British nationals and eligible Afghans safely and quickly.

A NEO not in our day-to-day training or battle rhythm. We were being asked to achieve a task the magnitude of which nobody could have predicted, in a complex environment, and under intense time pressures. The preparation for the NEO was, at the tactical level, rudimentary but helmed by professional and competent airborne soldiers who understood the intent. Down to the most junior commander the autonomy was vast, with ideas and initiatives being shared and implemented from all levels, allowing a collaborative effort to achieve success. Section Commanders trained in conventional small arms assaults and offensive actions were now having to quickly understand the nuances of British visa paperwork to filter the crowd full of the young, the weak and the vulnerable. It was a huge challenge, but one that the Brigade seized and wore, with a level of commitment and passion that can only be attributed to the high performing teams it yields.

Who We Are

Every individual has their own leadership style, their own reasons to be motivated, their own application of the Pegasus Ethos. As mentioned above, I believe challenge is the most accurate way to measure high performance. Challenge is something new and difficult, which requires effort and dedication. It is a test of one's abilities or resources in a demanding but often stimulating undertaking. As a demanding task, it calls for special effort and dedication. This is the crux of high performance: you have to be willing to undertake something that will test your abilities and your mental, physical or conceptual capacity in order to achieve it.

For an aspiring airborne soldier that might be making the physical effort of getting fit enough to pass P Company, or it could be taking on the great mental effort jumping out of a plane, or it could be as intangible as calling for the special dedication within yourself to embody the Pegasus ethos and wear the maroon beret. The great thing about this though is that you, as the quantifier of high performance, decide what 'success' looks like. Is success a result: the destination? Or is it a process: the journey?

I believe that it is the process, I believe that high performance comes from a myriad of efforts and personal achievements. I have never, and will never, win an Olympic medal, I will never race on the world stage in running or cycling or triathlon. But I will still wake up before the sun and go on a run or a cycle because I am passionate about it, I am committed to it, and I love to challenge myself. To win? Rarely. To Perform? Always.

Finding the passion and commitment within yourself for something that is not physical or tangible, finding intrinsic motivation, actually widens the realm and breadth of where your high performance could take you. Being intrinsically motivated comes with something that for many is very difficult to swallow: not allowing yourself to fear failure. This is important to me, because I see it a lot in the younger generation and soldiers in the brigade and wider army. Being motivated because you fear failure can take a huge toll on a person's belief in their abilities and confidence to achieve goals. If you fear failure, then you leave yourself with only two options- winning or losing. But it is not that black and white. Direct success or 'winning' is a self-imposed restriction, and it does not offer room for growth, development and learning lessons.

When I was in the junior term at RMAS I injured my knee and had to have it reconstructed. I was placed in the Lucknow rehabilitation platoon. A mark, a delay, a huge obstacle in the journey I thought I was on. But I realised that external circumstances could not mar my internal motivations, my commitment and passion to commission. I used the time in rehab to find room to grow, develop and learn lessons about myself and overcoming adversity. As a result, when I returned to course, I had such a changed and reformed mindset that I not only went onto commission, but also to receive Sword of Honour.

A few years into junior officership, I had reached a point where I did not feel challenged and that in turn meant I felt less committed and less passionate because I could not find a cause. I decided I wanted to serve with airborne forces and be a part of 16 AAX Combat Team. To do this, I had to pass P Company. Everyone had been asking me if I was nervous and worried and if I thought they would let women pass the course (the pass rate for men is 35%, and – at the time – for women it was 0%). I remember having a frank conversation with my Battery Commander at the time and I said, “I am so excited to do something I might actually fail at”. To me, the challenge of the journey was every bit as rewarding as the prospect of the destination.

I was so excited by the prospect of finding my physical, or even mental, limits and seeing if I could push them further, or maybe just finding out exactly where they stopped! I was so enthralled by the opportunity of this personal challenge, that my commitment and passion soared. I could have come off the course on any of those days and have felt as fulfilled and proud as when I passed it. One of my fellow team members on the Army Cycling Team always says, “you have to be prepared to lose the race in order to win it”, and what she means is if you are not ready to put everything you have on the line and to push your limits to their capacity, then you are not really committed to winning.

Conclusion

The Pegasus Ethos inspires a brigade, a battalion, an individual to find the determination and spirit to be brave and challenge ourselves. It offers the soldiers reading it the opportunity to interpret it how they want, to use its lessons and its core spirit to inspire themselves to high performance.

When it comes to High Performance in the military, it all comes down to being willing to challenge yourself to achieve, being open to failing in order to succeed, being ready to lose in order to win, and being willing to be vulnerable in order to be courageous.

You do not have to be a part of 16 Air Assault Brigade Combat Team to achieve this but using the model of the Pegasus Ethos you’d be hard pressed not to find in yourself something special.

Find an ethos, a passion: Why You Are.

Apply that ethos, a commitment: How You Are.

Embody that ethos, the challenge: Who You Are.

Questions

1. Do you agree that high performance cannot be measured by trophies, or wins or medals? Is this a far too liberal view in the military environment where we are constantly measured by results?
2. How do you think you could motivate junior soldiers to achieve high performance if there isn’t a quantifiable value to the result? How can you encourage them to set themselves challenging goals?
3. Is ‘fear of failure’ an effective means of motivation, or do we need to instil in our junior soldiers and commanders the trust in intrinsic motivation?

Resources

- Rosie Wild, [The Pegasus Ethos](#), CAL Conference on High Performance, May 22.
- 16 Air Assault Brigade, [The Pegasus Ethos](#), 2016;
- Brené Brown, *Daring greatly: How the courage to be vulnerable transforms the way we live, love, parent and lead*, Gotham, 2012.
- Newton Institute, [6 Characteristics of a High-Performance Culture](#), 1 Nov 17.
- CAL Leadership Podcast, Episode 2, [Baroness Sue Campbell DBE](#), 26 Nov 20.
- CAL Leadership Podcast, Episode 9: [Eddie Jones](#), 4 Mar 21.
- CAL Leadership Podcast, Episode 23: [Kate Richardson-Walsh](#), 13 Jan 22.